



The Archbishop of Canterbury discussed the changing face of Britain in the 21st century in a speech given to the British-Irish Association on 2nd September 2023.

**Read the Archbishop's speech in full:\***

*\*Note: Not checked against delivery.*

The objective of the coronation service was simple and clear: to draw on our common history, to be honest about who and where we are, and to look with hope to the future, all within a clearly Christian service of worship and consecration. And not to drop the crown!

I start there because it is easy to say but begs a very large number of questions.

*Who are we?* We are the nation that saw its banking system collapse only 15 years ago. We are the nation state that freely chose Brexit, always remembering that Scotland and Northern Ireland voted the other way. Post Brexit, the single most important impact on our identity and foreign policy vision since the withdrawal from Empire, it is easy to quote again that cliché attributed to US Secretary of State Dulles after Suez, "Britain has lost an Empire but not yet found a role". It is simplistic nonsense, and withdrawal from the EU no more need condemn us to decline that it must guarantee us success.

We are also post Covid and we are fighting a huge European war at one remove. We have the long term existential threats from climate change, with the best estimate of side effects being a 7-10 fold increase in the number of world refugees to 1 billion, and multiple wars as a result.

All great events have an initial explosion and then long periods of fall out. Brexit is one, with its deep divisions, now slowly healing. Covid will affect us for a generation and we cannot even begin to guess how. Our economy was deeply damaged in the financial crisis, with worse through Covid, and is in no position to rearm, even if we wanted to. Climate is a long slow explosion, with huge advance warning and multiple aftershocks.

*What is our character?* It changes with events. At Canterbury Cathedral there is a chapel set aside for the worship – in French – by descendants of the Huguenot exiles who came to England mainly in vast numbers from the mid-16th century until after the 1685 Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Attached to the door is a comment by the English essayist Samuel Smiles. It says this:

*"Three hundred years during which ... revolutions have swept over Europe; and still that eloquent memorial of the religious history of the middle ages survives, bearing testimony alike to the rancour of the persecutions abroad, .....the large and liberal spirit of the English church, and the glorious asylum which England has in all times given to foreigners flying for refuge against oppression and tyranny."*

When large scale threats abound, then it is infinitely harder to look outwards and be generous: leadership goes to a premium, but may be for good or for ill. Leadership involves sacrifice. Reconciliation requires sacrifice by the stronger – or apparently stronger – party to a conflict if it is to have credibility. For Christians sacrifice is supremely by God reconciling humanity at the cost of His Son. Reparation requires sacrifice. But sacrifice, part of generosity, is a very hard word politically, and a tough one personally.

What is our purpose? Nations define identity in terms of calling, giving them an identity.

In Russia there is a Russian exceptionalism that can, in different shapes, be traced back to the 16th century Ivan the Great (or Terrible), which was especially strong during the 19th century and is found in Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and Gogol among others, and in the 20th century by Solzhenitsyn in his later writings after the fall of the USSR. It claims a divine and historic calling to be the bulwark of civilisation against western liberalism, even in 1820, and up to today. Referred to as an ideology as Russkyi Mir it was the basis of President Putin's long, pre-invasion essay.

In the USA the sense of the divine call and vocation for the US goes back to 1776 and also to the ratification by the states of the US constitution and Bill of Rights from 1789-1791 (for the first 12 amendments).

In the UK, Empire gave us a sense of calling: for some. It gave rise to heroism and villainy, to brutality and generous humanitarian sacrifice. In the coronation the ceremonial was consciously and deliberately drawing on our history, through the traditional music ("I Was Glad", and "Vivat" at the entry of the King and Queen, "Zadok the Priest" at the anointing). The presentation of regalia, the crowning, the communion, the robes and shape of the use of the Abbey deliberately reflected the images of 1953 and the late Queen. Ceremonial and colour, the heralds, the recognition, can in some cases be traced back to the coronation of Edgar in 973.

But it is a rare prophetic voice that questions Empire at its height. Rudyard Kipling, on Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee in 1897, published *Recessional*, which says in verse 3:

*Far-called, our navies melt away;*

*On dune and headland sinks the fire:*

*Lo, all our pomp of yesterday*

*Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!*

*Judge of the Nations, spare us yet,*

*Lest we forget—lest we forget!*

I remembered that poem when we turned to the present in the Coronation. How do we show humility after the changes Kipling prophesied? The hereditary aristocracy whose homage took an hour in 1953, was almost entirely omitted. Homage was restricted to three symbolic acts. The Prime Minister was involved, reading a Christocentric biblical passage, reflecting the change in our sense of hierarchy. Churchill himself had no role in 1953. The dramatic change in the makeup of our population was seen in those who presented the regalia, and the greeting at the end from leaders of different faiths: both of these new aspects. That reflected the history of Empire, deconstructed to reveal a nation remodelled, multi-ethnic, multi-faith, with three of the four senior posts in Government held by those who are of minority ethnic, immigrant descent. We rejoiced in the change, celebrate the diversity and our comfort with it. For the first time ever the King audibly prayed a prayer, not for his glory but to serve well, after the manner of Christ. The readings from the Bible changed so that the traditional 1 Peter 2 extract, used since 1661 as a justification for the rule of Kings by Divine Right, became the reading from Colossians 1, of God himself in Christ who serves and reconciles.

In fact, the whole theme of the coronation was that power is given for the purpose of service, not domination: for others, not for self. That was a deliberate and conscious reflection on identity in our experience today: the antipathy to hierarchy. Yet, symbolism alone cannot do the long term heavy lifting of setting identity.

Our economy is identity and ethics in numbers, and shapes who we are in ways that we often don't recognise. Since the Great Depression it is arguable that there have been two phases of understanding in western economics, phases that have recently been described as so dominant that they were Structures, or Orders of understanding.

First, was the shift from liberal economic approaches of the 19th and very early 20th century to the New Deal of Roosevelt after 1932 and the dominance of Keynesian thinking (or neo-Keynesianism after his death) which created the post 1945 financial and economic architecture of the world, even through the period of decolonisation and the Cold War. In the 1980s it was rapidly and systematically displaced by a much more market driven economy and a monetarist approach, led by the thinking of those such as Milton Friedman and the Chicago school, by the philosophical input of those such as Hayek and politically by Mrs Thatcher and President Reagan. This new Order had a liberal (in the sense of reduced Government interference) approach to all aspects of Government and a deep trust in the beneficial influence of markets to sort things out well. That led to hubris, and to disempowerment; the market can work it out, whether in housing, inequality, water supply and even university education or prisons.

I am not going to go into either Order in any detail. That is done superbly in a number of books cited, but there are several points that affect identity. Above all both Orders have a very positive assumption about human nature, ignoring the deeply Christian sense that the nature of human beings is biased towards sin: self as the ultimate deity to which we sacrifice. Keynes was explicit about the outcome of such an approach, despite adopting it, describing his generation as the lucky one, with the benefits of Christian order but without the personal constraints that it brings, in a letter to Virginia Woolf in the early 1920s.

On Friday 25th August I was in North Philadelphia, staying with and learning from a remarkable Christian community called the Simple Way led by Shane Claiborne. It is ecumenical, and he lives in an area which is the US centre of fentanyl and Tranq (as well as other drugs), beset by gun crime with frequent shootings heard. The community works in a widespread partnership of compassion. I have never seen so many people on the streets or such a vast proliferation of open drug use, sale and absolute tragedy for the addicts and those around them. Hundreds congregated on the main road. Those there have fallen out of any market, through any safety net, and often die young, lonely and unaccompanied. Bodies dumped in shopping trollies on the route children take to the local school.

Markets are useful. It is a truism that since 1980 more people have been lifted out of extreme poverty than at any time in human history. But they are impersonal. Adam Smith was clear about that. They are creations of human beings, not our ultimate deity, but idolatrous if given final loyalty. They fail because human beings are not rational economic actors but have all sorts of irrational affections and desires, and sins. As we discovered after the Great Recession and financial crisis of 2008-2009, markets fail, and when they do the fall out is severe and lasts years. They are idols that fall under pressure.

Which brings me to the next point of context. As we all know very well, the trend in post war philosophy, especially in Europe and to some extent in the USA, has been towards the individual as the sole actor in their own drama and the final arbiter of their fate. True, they are caught up in forces more powerful than themselves and find themselves vast desires, but they are always somehow alone.

In the way these trends have emerged into culture there is a great danger of the entirely false idea prevailing that for most of us we are essentially autonomous human actors, protected by markets, rational economic actors, who have the right to live without all but the most essential restraints on what we make of ourselves. That understanding of life is not by any means entirely new but has reached a certain level of predominant thinking in everything from culture wars, through economics to the politics of sexuality. We are more and more individualist.

At the same time, as The Times of London has commented so continually this week, Christian and all religious faith has declined dramatically.

I should be clear that this is not all bad, for Churches are ruined when wealth and power lead them to self-reliance. I rejoice in less of a bossy attitude, and of the church stepping back from telling everybody what to do, here and elsewhere. Except in the House of Lords! It is not the biblical pattern of Jesus who made himself a servant, washed His disciples' feet, lived a holy life and by His death and resurrection lifted the weary, the outcast and the failure into hope.

In the coronation this mixed picture of our current condition was also recognised deliberately. It was done in updating for today's world the purpose of the regalia, recognising the challenges that leaders, exemplified in the King, take on. It was done in confession, in the ancient cry for mercy from God, sung in Welsh (a first at a coronation) by Bryan Terfel, in a new setting. We sought to say, "There is so much to celebrate today, but all is not for the best in the best of all possible worlds, and the problems are from us. We begin by seeking mercy from God."

So how is it addressed? Obviously there are no simple answers; we need to remember that Government neither can, nor should, do everything. But Government must function; with humility. Not dominating. Embracing complexity, recognising limits. Dysfunction, absence, are leadership, but bad leadership.

In this last section I shall pick up on two points on leadership from Henry Kissinger, drawn from his book on leadership to mark his hundredth birthday in late May, in an interview in the Economist.

"Identify where you are. Pitilessly."

That means individual and collective self-awareness and analysis. My first question when faced with opponents should not be, "What is wrong with them?" But "What is wrong with me, and how do they and I change?" It also means a very clear analysis of strengths and weaknesses in our societies, both regionally and across the UK. In the past, we had forms of enquiry and self-examination sometimes by Royal Commissions, such as the 19th century report on the civil service that moved the outcomes away from pure politics. A much more recent approach was the Parliamentary Commission on Banking Standards which reported 10 years ago (on which I sat) and which was drawn from across politics and neutral parties in both Houses of Parliament. The result was a unanimous report and clear recommendations for strengthening the security of the country's financial architecture and structures, especially the major banks. It neither pulled punches nor engaged in party politics. It is doable.

I do not speak into Northern Ireland much, for I am consciously ignorant, but listening over the last 24 hours it seems that a pitiless, non-political and transparent honesty about the current situation would be a good place to start.

Second, Kissinger said, "Define objectives that can enlist people. Find means, describable means, of achieving these objectives."

National identity is symbolised in national institutions but is lived in locality. In the UK they range from the Crown in Parliament through a vast host of intermediate institutions, down to the family and the individual. It is interesting to note in passing that in France there is no sense of intermediate identities between the state and the individual. They exist but count for less than us historically, and in the UK I suggest that they are being worn away. I drew heavily on William Temple's "Christianity and Social Order", emphasis on intermediate institutions to argue that they are where we develop identity and where we find out how to disagree well. They are the nurseries of identity.

Since the publication of Reimagining Britain, the Church of England has published four reports picking up on the ideas found there. These covered Housing, Racism, Social Care and most recently, Family and Households. Each had a panel that was widely drawn, including from outside the Church. Each of them includes a close look at intermediate institutions and their workings in the relevant area of society. Underlying each report was the sense that in the relevant area the intermediate institutions involved were either in crisis as a result of outside influences or were showing signs of internal failures in the relevant area.

The family or household is unique in its history, in its importance and in the enormous range of ways in which it exists. It is not only the place of raising children in some cases but is also the location of the greatest potential for good or harm to its members. It predates society itself and is the building block, or stumbling block, of all forms of societal relating. It is also the most important area of the formation of identity. This is not the place for a long discussion of policy, but I suggest that whatever else is done about identity, the task for all levels of government of creating a favourable legislative, fiscal, social, educational and medical environment for healthy family and household life is the sine qua non. Healing households cannot be legislated, but they can be impeded or encouraged.

Other intermediate institutions vary from political parties to companies of all sizes to sports clubs, social events, the NHS and individual hospitals, clinics and practices, schools, universities, public libraries, public health bodies and so on. Northern Ireland and each nation of the Union has its distinct aspects, as well as the ones we have in common. They are all in a constantly involving iterative relationship upwards to wider society and the nation, horizontally to each other and downwards to individuals.

Intermediate institutions are not only the tools for forming identity, they are also the means for creating objectives that are identifiable and enlist people. The coronation was followed on the next day by the Big Lunch Out and on the Monday by the Big Help Out, a volunteering day in which 7.2 million people took part. Both were aimed at looking to the future with stronger community, organised locally and co-ordinated nationally by a vast army of intermediate institutions including the Churches.

Intermediate institutions or governmental weakness or failure creates a vacuum which is then easily filled with other forms of association. For example in the 1930s, or the Klu Klux Klan in the US in the late 19th century. The Tanaiste yesterday remarked on how, in Northern Ireland lack of function in politics potentially opens the way for extremism. Politics always fills a vacuum.

To conclude: first, that the huge complexity of societies, economies, domestic and international influences and of 'events', requires leadership towards a consensus on the agreed values of the society. The fall of neo-liberalism was in part owing to its anthropological naivety, but nothing has taken its place, and to some extent we thus have culture wars. The hyper modernity emerging philosophically since the 1960s has not brought with it a value basis which enables a solid sense of identity to emerge. There have to be boundaries that are known, owned, applied and understood. The remorseless decline of religious views in the west, I would say especially of Christianity, is both a cause and an effect of the breakdown in agreed values. For those of us in churches, we need Shane Claibournes: those whose life speaks of a closer walk with God.

Second, the most difficult of these boundaries to be agreed (not least as a result of technological advance) is that of freedom of speech, religion and belief. That again requires a very strong protection in which both evil expression, and attacks on freedom of expression, are resisted with equal courage and wisdom.

Third, for any of this to work there must be leadership. Leadership will always be human and fallible, but it must be courageous, collaborative, compassionate and resilient, willing to lose office for what is right. And there, out of a deep fear of showing up how far I am from that ideal, I shall stop.

15 min read

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